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FBI sets spy sting

Soviet traps in D.C., Calif. computer plants

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The Federal Bureau of Investigation is using Abscam-style "stings" to battle thousands of Soviet-bloc agents sent here to steal American technology, USA TODAY has learned.

Russian agents are crisscrossing the country with blank checks, tempting government and industry officials mired in recession to sell out their companies and their country to stay afloat. Back in Moscow, a group of 400 to 500 agents is doing nothing but assessing what they need to steal, the Central Intelligence Agency estimates.

"It's a serious, serious problem," said Edward J. O'Malley, the FBI's assistant director of intelligence. "I cannot overstate the seriousness of it."

O'Malley — in a break from normally tight-lipped FBI policy — agreed to discuss Soviet technological espionage to alert the public to a widespread and growing problem.

Officials at companies in California's Silicon Valley said the FBI's sting operations are targeted at Soviet-backed attempts to smuggle trade secrets or semiconductors out of the United States. Another sting operation is centered on a firm in suburban Washington.

"The FBI came to us" and set up a sting to lay a trap for a Soviet diplomat, an employee at the suburban Washington company said. Prime targets of several stings are Russian diplomats rather than agents. O'Malley estimates that 35 percent of Russian diplomats are actually Soviet spies.

If they're successful, it could be the first time sting operations have resulted in prosecutions of Soviet-bloc agents. In July, a sting originally targeted against Soviet-bloc efforts resulted in the arrests of several Japanese businessmen.

Hundreds of millions of dollars worth of American technology already has made its way into Soviet hands, a CIA document shows, including enough American-built micro-electronic equipment to meet 100 percent of the needs of the Soviet military.

The FBI suspects that diplomats pass equipment and trade secrets back to the Soviet Union in diplomatic pouches — packages that, under the Geneva Convention, can't be opened for inspection.

"There's certainly a damn good possibility that a lot is going out in those pouches," said Arthur Van Cook, former chief of information security at the Pentagon. Added former CIA Director Richard Helms, "It happens all the time."

The FBI never comments on specific investigations. However, O'Malley said it's "quite possible" that the FBI soon will be making arrests in cases connected with Soviet technological espionage.